

## Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

### Will Peres seize the initiative?

*The Labour candidate's political passivity may cost him the Israeli election.*

Observers of the Israeli political scene are shocked by the lack of vigor—especially on the part of Shimon Peres's opposition Labour Party—that has characterized Israel's national election campaign.

Despite occasional flashes of aggressiveness, the Labour Party has remained unable to mount a unified fight against Prime Minister Menachem Begin's ruling Likud Party. In this vacuum, Begin has adroitly exploited the crisis over Lebanon as an election-eve stunt to divert voter attention from troublesome domestic issues, such as triple-digit annual inflation.

Peres's passivity may well cost him the election on June 30. A senior aide privately admitted as much: "If things continue the way they have, I have no doubt the Likud will win it. We are in an almost impossible situation."

A Peres defeat will all but obliterate the chances for an overall Middle East peace settlement. According to informed Arab sources, such moderate Arab leaders as King Hussein of Jordan, the Saudi royal family, and President Saddam Hussein of Iraq would like to see Peres come to power in Israel in the hope that a moderate Peres-led government would be more amenable, unlike the fanatic Begin regime, to cooperating with international efforts to secure a comprehensive settlement instead of the Camp David "partial peace" approach favored by Begin. In con-

trast, a Begin victory would not merely reaffirm Camp David, but would reinforce Arab radicalism, thereby isolating and undermining the Arab moderates and locking Israel into a mode of permanent confrontation.

At the start of the election campaign earlier this year, the situation was quite the reverse, with Peres on the ascendant and the Begin regime in shambles. Now, however, short of an eleventh-hour upset by Peres, Begin is considered a shoo-in.

Why the sudden turnabout? The answer is simple: The fix is in for Begin.

According to intelligence insiders, a deal has been struck between Secretary of State Alexander Haig and the radical KGB secret service in the Soviet Union to bolster the Begin regime as a tool for partitioning Lebanon—a step toward furthering their parallel, mutually compatible plans to chuck détente and divide the Middle East along superpower lines.

Unless the Reagan administration acts unequivocally to ensure a Peres victory, the Haig-KGB scenario of realigning the Middle East around its most radical chips—i.e., Begin, Khomeini, and Qaddafi—will unfortunately prevail.

Backing this Haig-KGB "Yalta plan" for the region is a de facto "Re-elect Begin Committee" composed of Assad in Syria, Qaddafi in Libya, and Sadat in Egypt, all of whom are doing their utmost to

build up Begin's crisis management image inside Israel. Specifically, Assad, by refusing to pull Syrian missiles out of Lebanon, has provided Begin with a well-timed crisis around which to build up domestic support. Similarly, Qaddafi is flaunting Libya's dispatch of troops to Lebanon to beef up Palestinian forces there.

Last but not least, Anwar Sadat, worried that a Peres victory may spell the end of Camp David, rushed off to meet with Begin June 4 to reinforce Begin's image of statesman and peacemaker.

The Lebanon crisis has made it particularly difficult for Peres to fight back, since criticism of Begin could smack of lack of patriotism. "It's simple," said one frustrated Peres adviser. "We can either run for Begin or run for Assad."

Apparently recognizing that at this point he has little to lose, Peres has dropped his earlier caution and is finally beginning to take on Begin. At a recent rally in Jerusalem, Peres attacked Begin's fanaticism, calling him "a new Khomeini." And Gen. Chaim Bar-Lev, Peres's choice for defense minister, is also escalating the assault on Begin. "We are not going to be dragged into wars which are not in our self-interest," said Bar-Lev, who accused Begin of encouraging the Falangists in Lebanon. Bar-Lev pledged to rescind Begin's promise to back the Falange militarily.

According to Israeli sources, one of Peres's problems in his election bid has been the "snakes and traitors" who are diverting and diluting his campaign. Peres's long-time Labour Party rival, former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, is reportedly sowing divisiveness in the party ranks against Peres.